

PROFESSIONAL BRETHREN

BY GEORGE E. WALSH

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CHAPTER VII.

I FOUND my new position much more to my taste than the one I had been serving in. I had complete command of all the silver and valuables of the house, and it was a satisfaction to look at all this wealth even though I had not right in any of it. The curious circumstance that I should ever be placed as a guard over so much treasure amused me and induced speculations in my mind about the uncertainties and inconsistencies of life. A man of my profession must of necessity be something of a philosopher. How else could he accept the continual risk of capture and conviction and silence all qualms of fear and conscience when engaged on delicate and dangerous jobs? There are ups and downs in every life, I suppose, but none more so than in that of the professional burglar.

The second day of my installation as butler in the house was marked by an interesting event. Dr. Squires and Miss Stetson both appeared at lunch.

This meeting was not premeditated by my master. It was apparently purely accidental.

About noon the two visitors appeared at the house on horseback. My master did not see them at first. He was smoking in his dressing room when the clatter of horses' hoofs on the hard, gravelly drive attracted his attention. I was passing through the room at the time, removing the remnants of a late breakfast.

"Who's that coming, William?" he asked.

"I was near the window and, looking out, replied:

"Miss Stetson, sir, and I think the man they call Dr. Squires. I've never met him, but from what John said I judge it is."

A sudden exclamation from my master interrupted me, and I turned in time to see his face deathly pale. He recovered himself immediately, however.

"Dr. Squires and Miss Stetson, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

Then with admirable composure and with great tact he said:

"Oh, yes; I forgot to tell you, William, that they were coming here to lunch today. Have a good lunch for them at 2."

Then he hurriedly changed his coat and appeared in the courtyard in time to greet the guests. Through the open doors I could hear their voices.

"How do you do, Charles? Ready for early visitors? I didn't believe you were up yet."

It was the loud, gruff voice of the doctor. Then a feminine voice said apologetically, I thought:

"Good morning, Charles! I was out riding this morning with my man, and we met Dr. Squires. He insisted that we should come around here. So I consented provided he would promise to make you go off for a ride with us."

"Yes, that was the agreement, and to make my word good you must get ready and go."

"Well, I hadn't thought of going out this morning, but I will accompany you if you will both agree to come back here and take lunch."

"That's the man of business," laughed the doctor. "He exacts a fee for everything he gives. He won't even ride with us, Miss Belle, unless we swear to return and lunch with him. Well, as for my part I agree to it, for Charles always tempts me with his good lunches."

I could not hear the replies as they moved into the parlor, but I knew enough to convince me that my master was very sensitive about his jealousy of the doctor, and that not even to me would he admit it.

A few minutes later I saw them going off together, Miss Stetson riding a fine roan, with the doctor mounted

on a fiery, coal black steed on her right and my master on her left with his fine white Arabian mare. It was a spectacular sight to watch them, knowing as I did something of their lives. I wondered which she would select in the end—the black or the white?

Promptly at 2 they returned, a little fatigued by the ride, but jovial and in excellent spirits.

When the doctor came into the dining room, I scrutinized him carefully. He gave me no particular notice, and this left me to myself to examine him. My distant view through the field-glasses had been pretty correct, but on closer examination he revealed the most distinct features of his face—his coal black, brilliant and restless eyes. These eyes never laughed, not even when he was convulsed with merriment. They were always cold, penetrating and, as I thought, sardonic. They seemed to repel and fascinate at once. They easily dominated everything that came under their sway.

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He was talkative and lively to a degree, forming the life of the party, but the eyes that so attracted seldom took notice of me. An uncontrollable desire to have them centered on me for an instant to fathom their meaning seized me. To accomplish this I spilled some of the salad dressing on his coat sleeve. He turned a wrathful look at me, and I had one long, steady gaze into those eyes. So intent was I that I forgot to be confused at my mishap. The incident occupied only a minute, but in that short space I had read the character of the man.

"What sort of servants do you have here, Charles?" he broke out savagely when the dressing filtered down from his coat sleeve to the floor.

My master looked annoyed and quickly apologized.

"He is a new man, doctor, and you must overlook this accident."

The conversation flowed on freely after that, and the mishap was soon forgotten.

When the wine and cigars were brought, they retired to an open balcony just off the dining room. Through the open window I could still hear their talk. Most of it was of little consequence to me, but finally the words of the doctor made me prick up my ears.

"By the way, Charles, you spoke of a friend of yours having a couple of Dane hounds for sale. Can I secure them for a nominal price?"

"Yes, I can get them and make you a present of them. But why do you want two more? You have two of the finest Danes I ever saw."

"No, I haven't any?" ejaculated both my master and Miss Stetson.

"No, they are both dead," replied the doctor.

"Why, how is that? What killed them?"

"They simply died. My man overfed them, I imagine, and they both died yesterday of convulsions."

"How strange!"

"No, not strange at all. I told my man that he would kill them if he fed them too freely while they got no exercise."

"You don't think he poisoned them?" asked Miss Stetson.

"No, certainly not. I attended them when they were sick and cut open their bodies afterward. There was no sign of poison in their stomachs."

"Then he made arrangements with my master to secure the two hounds from his friend."

I did not listen to the descriptions of the new hounds or to the terms of the agreement. My mind was more concerned about the doctor's reason for concealing the attempted robbery of his house. Why did he lie about the death of the two Danes and why did he not report the facts of the case to the police? These were questions that I could not dismiss from my mind, although I tried to be convinced that it was natural for such a man as Dr. Squires to hush up anything like a sensation. It would only attract people to his workshop, which he wanted to keep quiet and exclusive.

"Well, I hadn't thought of going out this morning, but I will accompany you if you will both agree to come back here and take lunch."

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"Good morning, Charles,"

He dropped his head back upon the pillows and closed his eyes. I withdrew as quietly as I could.

I took one of the horses from the stable which John said needed exercise, and I cantered slowly down the road toward the doctor's house. As I approached I looked with interest at various objects that had become indelibly impressed upon my memory from the experience of that eventful night when I attempted to enter the house. I had by no means given up all idea of exploring the interior of the haunted house, but was merely postponing the second trial for a more opportune time. Meanwhile everything about the premises assumed some special importance to me.

I wished very much to see the interior of the house in the daytime, and I determined to force an entrance at all hazards in delivering my message to the doctor. I feared the doctor would come outside on the piazza or that his servant might insist upon taking the message in to the doctor. To avoid this, if possible, I stopped some distance from the place, hitched my horse to a tree and approached the house on foot, keeping well in the shadow of trees and shrubberies to prevent anybody seeing me.

I succeeded so well in this ruse that I reached the piazza without being discovered. The bell, which I rang, echoed throughout the gloomy interior of the house so discordantly that it made one think of ghosts and departed spirits. I seemed to hear the scurry of footsteps, as if the bell had given the alarm to innumerable rats and mice, but a moment later I was satisfied that the noise was made by human feet.

The doctor's servant—a dark, dried up specimen of a mummy from India—glided toward the door, making the scuffling noise with his sandals. The man's eyes were small and beadlike, and his arms and fingers were long and bony, but they were nevertheless strong and agile. He shuffled toward the door with an anxious look on his face. He was evidently disturbed by the thought that somebody had approached the house without attracting his attention.

He refused to open the door more than a foot and stood there making a guttural sound as if trying to ask my errand.

"I have a message for Dr. Squires," I said.

He stuck out a long, bony hand as if to take the letter which he supposed I had. At least he could hear and was familiar with the English language. I also believe that he could speak and that his dumbness was merely pretended. But there is no way to make a man speak if he doesn't want to, or at least not under ordinary circumstances, in a civilized country.

"It is not a letter," I added as he held out his hand for some time. "I have a message to deliver—a verbal message."

He shook his head and withdrew his hand.

"Let me in, and tell the doctor I want to see him."

Again he shook his head and made an inarticulate guttural sound.

I was getting impatient at the delay and the man's stubbornness. Placing a foot in the crack of the door, I held it so that he could not slam it in my face.

"I tell you I have a message from Mr. Goddard, and I must see the doctor," I said in decided tones. "Will you let me in or must I force myself in?"

I could see that the man was in a quandary. He wanted me to stand outside while he went and told the doctor, but I had no intention of retiring. He motioned for me to remove my foot, but I answered him blandly:

"Not until I see Dr. Squires. You may as well go first as last and tell him that Mr. Goddard has sent a messenger to see him."

Gradually the wrathful, beady eyes shifted from me to a seat in the hall. He was evidently deliberating upon the best step to take, and I could see the line of his reasoning.

"Let me stand in the hall until you go and call him," I said, "or I will take that seat there and wait."

This time my proposition was accepted. The man shook his head affirmatively, pointed to the chair and then cautiously opened the door. I stepped in and made a move to take the seat, but I had no intention of staying in the hall after once gaining an entrance. When the man turned his back upon me, I quietly followed him to the doctor's office. He made some signs to somebody in the room, and I heard the gruff words of the doctor ask:

"Who is it that Charles has sent?"

I stepped to the doorway and replied: "I'm his butler, but this copper colored servant of yours refused to admit me. I had to force myself in."

The servant started around as if to clutch me by the throat, and the doctor smothered an exclamation that sounded very much like an oath.

"What business have you to force yourself into anybody's house?" he demanded in a rough voice.

"None whatever except that I had a message for you, and this Indian wouldn't let me in," I answered quickly.

"Well, it's his business to keep strangers out. Those are my instructions."

"Then he was right, and I was wrong," I said, "and if that's the case I'll withdraw."

I turned my back on the two and started for the door, but the words of the doctor called me back. He had perfectly recovered himself and realized that he was making too much fuss with a servant over a trivial matter.

"Come, come, don't get huffy," he said pleasantly. "Your sudden entrance annoyed me, that's all. What is the message that your master sends?"

He looked at me through a pair of eyeglasses, his dark, searching eyes taking in every part of me, and for the first time in my life I felt uncomfortable under close scrutiny.

"Let me see. You are the man who spilled the salad dressing over me, aren't you?"

He laughed heartily, as if the incident amused him.

"Well, well, this is the second time you have given me offense," he added

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